



FACT SHEET

Your Medicine: Play It Safe

Have you ever had a problem with your medicines? You are not alone. There are so many things to keep track of. For example, you may have asked yourself:

- When exactly should I take my medicine?
- Is it safe to take my vitamins when I am taking a prescription medicine?
- Now that I feel better, can I stop taking my medicine?

Let's face it. Medicine is prescribed to help you. But it can hurt you if you take too much or mix medicines that don't go together. Many people are harmed each year, some seriously, because of taking the wrong medicine or not taking the right medicines correctly.

You can help get the best results by being a partner with your health care team. **In this fact sheet, "health care team" includes:**

- The **doctor, physician assistant, nurse practitioner, or other professional** who prescribes your medicine for you or is in charge of your care.
- A **nurse** who helps with your care at home, a doctor's office, or a hospital.
- The **pharmacist** who fills your prescription and is available to answer questions about your medicines.

4 WAYS TO PLAY IT SAFE WITH MEDICINES

1. Give your health care team important information

Be a partner with your health care team. Tell them about:

- All the medicines, vitamins, herbals, and dietary supplements you're already taking. This includes:
 - **Prescription medicines.**
 - **Medicines you can buy without a prescription**, such as aspirin, antacids, laxatives, and cough medicine.
 - **Vitamins and dietary supplements**, such as St. John's Wort or ginkgo biloba.

Also be sure to tell your health care team:

- If you have **medicine allergies** or if you have had problems when taking a medicine before.
- About any **other doctors** or health care professionals who have prescribed medicine for you or suggested that you take a vitamin or herbal supplement.
- If you are **pregnant**, may get pregnant, or **nursing** a baby
- About **any other illness** or medical condition you have, like diabetes or high blood pressure
- **If cost is a concern**, there may be another medicine that costs less and will work the same.

2. Get the Fact about your medicine

Ask the questions listed on the next page about every new prescription medicine. Get the answers you need from your health care team before you take your medicine.

If your doctor writes your prescription by hand, **make sure you can read it.** If you can't read your doctor's handwriting, your pharmacist might not be able to either. If your doctor submits your prescription to the pharmacy electronically, ask for a copy of the prescription.

Ask your doctor to write down on the prescription what the medicine is used for...not just **"take once a day"** but **"take once a day for high blood pressure."**

If you have other questions or concerns:

- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Write questions down ahead of time and bring them to your appointment.

By taking the time to ask questions now, you may be preventing problems later.

Tips!

- **Write your questions down** ahead of time. Keep a list of questions you want to ask your health care team. Take the list with you to your appointment.
- **Take notes** when you get information from your health care team
- **Bring a friend or family member** with you when you visit the doctor. Talking over what to do with someone you trust can help you make better decisions.
- **Try to use the same pharmacy** to buy all of your medicines so your prescription records will all be in one place.
- **Read and save the patient information** that comes with your medicine. It's often stapled to the bag from the pharmacy.
- **Keep a list of all the medicines, vitamins, and dietary supplements you take.** Be sure to add new medicines to the list when you start taking something new or when you change your dose. Show the list to your doctor and pharmacist. Use the list at the back of this pamphlet.
- **Make a copy of your list.** Keep one copy and give the other to a friend or loved one.

3. Stay with your treatment plan

Now that you have the right medicine, you'll want to carry out the treatment plan. But that's not always easy. The medicines may cause side effects. Or you may feel better and want to stop before finishing your medicines.

- Take all the antibiotics you were prescribed. If you are taking an antibiotic to fight an infection, it is very important to take all of your medicine for as many days as your doctor prescribed, even if you feel better.
- Ask your doctor if your prescription need to be refilled. If you are taking medicine for high blood pressure or to lower your cholesterol, you may be using your medicine for a long time.
- If you are having side effects or other concerns, tell your doctor. You may be able to take a different amount or type of medicine.
- Your medicine was prescribed only for you. Never give your prescription medicine to somebody else or take prescription medicine that wasn't prescribed for you, even if you have the same medical condition.
- Ask whether you need blood tests, x-rays, or other lab tests to find out if the medicine is working, to find out if it's causing any problems, and to see if you need a different medicine. Ask your doctor to tell you what the tests showed.

4. What products can help me keep track of my medicines?

Many products can help remind you to take your medicine on time and keep track of the doses you take. There are containers you can fill with you pills for each day of the week calendars to check off, and even products that fit on top of a pill bottle. Ask your pharmacist for help finding the right product for you.

Tips!

You can get help:

- At work, there may be a nurse on site.
- At school, a school nurse may be able to help your child take medicines on time and safely.
- At home, a visiting nurse may be able to help you.

Friends and family can help by:

- Going with you to the doctor. Ask them to take notes about your medicines and other parts of your treatment plan.
- Picking up your medicine at the pharmacy. Have them show the pharmacist your list of medicines, vitamins, and supplements. They should ask, "Will this new medicine work safely with the other medicines?"
- Calling regularly to remind you to take your medicine on time. If you are having any problems, let them know.
- Keeping a record of what medicine you take so you won't take it twice.

For more information

To learn about specific medicines, if you have Internet access, go to www.medlineplus.gov and click on "Drug Information." If you do not have Internet access, ask your local librarian for help.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has booklets about preventing, diagnosing, and treating common health conditions. For a list of topics, visit its Web site at www.ahrq.gov

How to order copies of the *Your Medicine: Play It Safe* booklet

For a free booklet (up to 10 free copies), e-mail the AHRQ Publication Clearinghouse at ahrqpubs@ahrq.gov or call their toll-free number: 800-358-9295.

Larger quantities can be purchased from the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE), which may have bulk discounts available. NCPIE also offers information about other resources for learning about safe medicine use. Visit its Web sites: www.talkaboutrx.org and www.bemedwise.org

Or contact them at:

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